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Parthia and Sarmatian peoples in the northern Pontic and the Don-Volga areas

The history of the Iranian Arsacid state (247 BC – 224 AD) is still being discussed mainly from the point of view of classical sources, for the basic evidence for the study of Parthia are testimonies of the Greek and Roman authors. The nomadic peoples of Eurasia and events which took place on the northern borders of Iran were as a rule of little importance to the ancient western historians..P. .. P. – who left just fragmentary accounts on steppe peoples. The same applies to Chinese records. The written evidence can be supplemented by archaeological data from Iran, Transcaucasia and the Ponto-Caspian area. The study of the history of the ancient peoples inhabiting the Crimea region, the Black Sea and the Caspian areas in the last decades has made very considerable advances, particularly through the accumulation of new archaeological, numismatic and epigraphic sources.

Using the archaeological and written evidence, the paper will present and analyze finds of Parthian objects (art artifacts and coins) in the northern Pontic and the Don-Volga areas. Dating and historical interpretation of Parthian objects are often subject of controversy. In the paper an attempt will be made to reconstruct the political and cultural circumstances in which Parthian objects went to the northern Pontic and the Don-Volga areas.

The Parthians maintained relations with the Sarmatian peoples from beyond the Caucasus by way of Transcaucasia. The whole Transcaucasian region (Iberia, Armenia and Albania) was politically and economically connected with the Parthian kingdom. Parthian influence can be documented by a number of coin hoards in Transcaucasia

containing Arsacid issues, mainly the coins from Mithradates II onwards up to the 1st century AD.

The Sarmatians conducted their advances into Iran by way of the Caucasus, Albania and Atropatene. There were close contacts, at times peaceful, at times of war, between the Parthians, Transcaucasia and the nomadic tribes from the North Caucasian steppelands (for Albania cf. Strab. 11, 4, 1. On Iberia's contacts with nomadic tribes, see Strab. 11, 3, 3). The plains to the north of the Caucasus inhabited mainly Sarmatian tribes.

In the north beyond the Caucasus up to the Aral Sea lived the peoples of the Aorsi and of the Upper Aorsi known from some western sources (Strab. 11, 2, 1; 11, 5, 8). According to Chinese testimonies, dating from the end of the 2nd–1st century BC, in western Central Asia Parthia bordered many nomadic and seminomadic peoples, including the Yen-ts'ai (in the Aral region). In the 1st century AD, a new steppe confederation, the Alanoi, began to gain strength near the northern borders of Iran and carried out devastating raids against Parthia in AD 73 (by way of the Transcaspien area and Hyrcania) and AD 135 (by way of the Caucasus).

In the 1st century BC and 1st century AD, there were many episodes which show the connections of the Parthians with the peoples of western Central Asia and the Ponto-Caspian steppelands. Thus, e.g., Artabanos II tried to gain support of some Sarmatian rulers (Tac. Ann. 6, 33–35). At the same time, other Sarmatian tribes, probably the Alanoi, attacked the Parthians in Armenia, thereby threatening the northwestern provinces of the Arsacid empire (ca. 35 AD) (Ios. Ant. 18, 97).

The history of the Sarmatians is bound up with military expeditions into Transcaucasia and Iran. Testimony of this fact is to be found in the archaeological data from the steppe area. At Kosika on the Lower Volga, a rich royal grave has been excavated. Its equipment, which do not form a homogenous collection, was deposited in the grave in the 1st century BC. On a bowl discovered in the tomb, there is an inscription containing the royal Armenian name Artavasdes. It would imply that the bowl was plundered in Transcaucasia at a time when Sarmatian warriors were operating to the south of the Caucasus, perhaps in conjunction with nomadic raids against the Parthians. A silver cup with a dedication to «king Pakoros» originated from the clandestine excavations in the Kuban basin in the 1930s. Finds of Parthian ivory plaques of the rhytons in Olbia, dated to 2nd century AD, a gold wreath with an imprint of a Parthian coin from Pantikapaion, and other objects show that contacts between Parthia and Sarmatian areas were vivid. Recently, an iron knife with an ivory handle was found in a Sarmatian burial at Krasnogorovka (near Azov on the Lower Don, 1st century AD). The handle has a depiction of a Parthian king or prince.

Some Sarmatian tribal groups advanced into northern Iran. It is in this area, in the region of Dailaman, that archaeologists have discovered burials containing funerary structures of the Sarmatian type dating to the Arsacid period (Esperi, Noruzmahale, Khoramrud, Shahpir). Burial structures, customs and goods found in the graves (iron and bronze swords, daggers, horse equipment and mirrors exhibit close analogies with those of the Sarmatians. In certain burial grounds in Albania, especially at Mingechaur, graves are similar to the tombs from the Dailaman region.

Under the Arsacids, international trade developed on a significant scale. At the same time, as the Parthians turned their attention to Armenia and Transcaucasia, their relations to the steppe tribes of the Lower Volga and of the southern Urals areas became vivid. According to Strabo 11, 5, 8 Indian and Babylonian products passed through Media and Armenia across the Caucasus into the regions occupied by the Upper Aorsi. Finds of Arsacid coins in Transcaucasia (from Mithradates II onwards, see above) and on the Lower Volga fully correspond with this testimony. The trade could have flourished only under the protection of the nomadic rulers. Objects of Parthian origin have been found in the forest belt of contemporary Russia and in the North Pontic area. Parthian coins of the 1st century BC – 1st century AD have also been found in the southern foothills of the Urals in the vicinity of Uralsk.

In all likelihood, a general northern exchange route existed linking Western Turkestan with the southern Urals region and the North Pontic area. Trade between those countries is clearly documented from archeological research. Some coins of Bosphoros have been found in Chorasmia attested are coins from Phanagoreia (ca. 250–200 BC), of Sauromates I (AD 93–123), and of Cotys (AD 123–132). It seems that some objects recovered at Chorasmian centres, came from the Sarmatian and North Pontic areas. This evidence can be associated with Ptolemy's geographical account on the northern route in the Pontic and Caspian steppes (Ptol. Geogr. 6, 14, 1 ff.). Ptolemy apparently received a number of reports from merchants involved with the trade with Central Asia. As the first author he mentions the rivers Rha/Volga, Daix/Ural and Iastos/Emba in the Caspian region.